

Upstate Churches Search Their Hearts for a Healthier Life

Issue

When Congregational Health Ministers from fourteen AME churches in the upstate gathered together for a Saturday conference on addressing the health needs in their churches, they were looking for a big dose of encouragement and a lot of help. Numerous failed attempts at trying to motivate church members to make healthier lifestyle changes had depleted their desire to keep going.

We know in public health that churches are prime environments for teaching, supporting, and encouraging the maintenance of health behavior changes in congregational members. We've also learned that it takes a supportive pastor, a willing church, and a committed congregational health minister to make those health behavior changes happen. The challenge lies in the coordination of those three parties while providing them with a tailor-made, evidence-based program that meets the needs of a diverse church body. The American Heart Association has developed just the tool.

During 2005, 12,693 South Carolinians died from cardiovascular disease, more than the total number of people who died from all cancers, pneumonia, influenza, and car accidents combined. Stroke is the third leading cause of death in our state, resulting in 2,449 deaths during 2005.

Intervention

The South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) partnered with The American Heart Association to implement Search Your Heart, a heart-health and stroke prevention program. This program targets African-American and Hispanic/Latino communities and focuses on reducing heart disease and stroke risk factors. Fourteen Congregational Health Ministers from AME churches in the upstate were trained in the Search Your Heart program in 2007-2008.

Impact

Of the five AME churches trained in Laurens and Greenwood County, four AME Church congregations are now consistently making physical activity and nutritional changes to reduce their risk of heart disease and stroke. Results accomplished in just three months after beginning implementation of the Search Your Heart program include:

- Nearly 20 members of New Bethel AME Church met to learn about the risk factors that lead to heart disease and stroke. One month later, those church members decided to do something about the number of vegetables their church family was eating. Three men in the church planted a garden on the church's property so that all church members would have access to fresh vegetables this year;
- Elzee AME Church, a small rural church in Clinton, SC decided to begin a one-hour aerobics class each Wednesday night before Bible Study. About 10 individuals are regular attendees to this supportive outlet of physical activity. Church members are also educated monthly via the Search Your Heart program and are offered free blood pressure screenings every Sunday;
- Mt. Zion AME Church in Joanna, SC is implementing the Search Your Heart program on a monthly basis; and
- Pine Grove AME Church in Hodges, SC is implementing the Search Your Heart program monthly and conducting monthly blood pressure screenings. Since February 2008, an average of three to four individuals each month have been referred to a physician because of a high blood pressure reading. Congregational Health Minister Johnnie Klugh reports, "Church members are coming to me every week and even calling during the week to talk about personal health concerns and to seek guidance about scheduling a visit with a physician." The culture of Pine Grove AME Church is changing; members are becoming more aware of their health risks and are now taking action.

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